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INVOLVING THE PUBLIC IN PUBLIC DECISIONS :

Thank you for this opportunity to tell you personally and unequivocally that one of the major imprints I want to leave on the Soil Conservation Service is the development of policies that insure extensive, high-quality participation by the American public in determining our actions.

My career has centered on the encouragement of public participation as the editor of a weekly newspaper and of National Wildlife magazine; as an executive staff member of state and national conservation associations; as the chief of an education division within the Virginia Commission of Game and Inland Fisheries, and in natural resources teaching and extension work at Michigan State University.

When I wrote a master's thesis and then a doctoral dissertation on the relationship between litigation and Forest Service management decisions, I learned what you in SCS may already know: that the amount of citizen litigation to block unacceptable decisions is directly related to the opportunities, or lack of opportunities, for public participation.

Let me set some early goals for the Department of Agriculture:

--We aim to make litigation unnecessary.

--We intend to remove any remaining shreds of administrative procedure which may tend to shelter our decisionmaking.

--We aim to help everyone who is affected by the results of our decisions become part of the decisionmaking process.

In return, we ask only for thoughtful participation by the public.

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Remarks prepared for delivery by M. Rupert Cutler, Assistant Secretary of Agriculture for Natural Resources and Environment, before the Soil Conservation Service workshop on public participation, Denver, Colorado, October 22, 1979

Our analysis of past public participation efforts within the agriculture department and elsewhere indicates there are five stages basic to any successful public participation effort.

First, we need to define each issue in terms of its legal, ecological, social, and economic considerations.

The public must help define the issues and alternatives. This involves two-way communication. The public needs to be informed of facts surrounding potential decisions. Resource professionals need to know how the public sees the situation. The public and the agency must be knowledgeable--equipped to participate effectively.

Through environmental education programs, such as the one in the Soil Conservation Service, we are committed to building the awareness, basic understanding, support and enthusiasm needed for effective citizen participation in wise resource management. I strongly believe there is a crucial link between environmental education and effective public participation in the future.

Second, we need to collect public comments.

Public participation efforts formerly relied heavily on public meetings and advisory groups. There are a great many other methods to involve the public and stimulate comment on proposals or alternatives.

We need to use whatever techniques will encourage thoughtful, well-reasoned, written or oral comments from individual citizens, and to see that all the interests that may be affected are represented.

At this session you will learn about several public participation methods. There are many publications that identify techniques for involving the public in different kinds of issues and under varying degrees of public awareness. Be sure your office bookshelf has at least one--and that you open it periodically!

Third, we need to analyze public comments.

The purpose is to describe objectively what the public said and how it varied from group to group. Analysts have developed--and continue to refine-- methods to systematically look at, summarize and display all the opinions, and their supporting reasons, offered by the public in response to a proposal.

Whenever thousands of communications are received, the information can be overwhelming. Systematic analysis is essential to relate public comments to the proposed alternatives in a consistent, visible and traceable way.

Summaries of the analyses are especially useful in showing the public how their comments were used in the decisionmaking process.

Fourth, we need to evaluate public comments. We need to interpret the importance of the different views expressed, and weigh this public input against other decision factors.

This evaluation is the responsibility of line officers in USDA, such as SCS state conservationists, whose job it is to make decisions and be accountable for them.

I want to emphasize that the evaluation of public comments is not a vote-counting process. That's why it's so important to get well-reasoned, high-quality responses from the public, and not just large numbers of opinions submitted.

We are interested in the number of people commenting, but more important are any new data provided by citizens or groups, their arguments for or against alternative actions, and their impressions of positive or negative effects. The public interest groups most affected or benefitted by Soil Conservation Service actions are becoming highly sophisticated and responsive.

Finally, we need to implement decisions. This includes notifying the public about the decision and underlying factors, securing the public's acceptance, and translating the decisions into programs of action.

This closes the decision loop so that we have a continuous process. This stage often is a good test of whether the public has been adequately involved in the decision.

There is no formula in any decision process that tells us what weight public participation should receive relative to other factors. Yet, with the principles I have outlined, the public views will be visible and traceable. We will "leave tracks"--a "paper trail" others can follow. And we can explain how public participation was used in making the final decisions and recommendations.

A strong commitment to public involvement characterizes USDA efforts under the Soil and Water Resources Conservation Act of 1977 (RCA).

The law was enacted to see that USDA soil, water, and related conservation programs are responsive to the long-term needs of the nation. A vigorous public participation effort is proving to be one basis for determining what those needs are and the kind of programs that will be acceptable for meeting them.

The act may include one of the biggest public participation efforts ever made in the United States.

From your experience with RCA you may recognize that public participation is no easy thing to do. If it were, we would not need this meeting or the ones for national office leaders that preceded it. There are no hard and fast rules. There is no standard recipe for getting results. Some people may feel uncomfortable about public participation.

Yet many of you have found in RCA, or in other program efforts, that public participation is an opportunity to be tremendously creative about your work. It can be--may already be--an exciting experience.

You have an early advantage in the Soil Conservation Service. Your employees already are people-oriented. Soil and water conservation district leaders, your closest partners, also are people-oriented. And they are "local people." Their suggestions about the RCA appraisal and program are essential for achieving soil and water conservation. Their participation is the first step toward commitment.

You also may have an early disadvantage in public participation. Because you have used some of the techniques for decades, you may not have seen the need for greater effort or new approaches. You may have misread some of the questions or conflicts in SCS-aided projects. You may have thought people had an ax to grind, or were mistaken in their opinions or facts. Sometimes they can help you understand the potential impacts of alternative decisions.

If some of your efforts at public participation did not pan out very well it may have been that public participation, just as the environmental impact statement at first, was treated as an add-on to the planning process. It must be an integral and flexible part of planning, to precede and inform the decision.

You need to talk with, and listen to, the public at several stages. You need to analyze and evaluate what you hear from the public and fit it into your planning. Then you need to feed back to the public what people's ideas are, what you did with them, and what gaps may still remain.

The Soil Conservation Service will have important challenges in RCA this winter:

- appraisal parts I and II;

- program;

- public meetings;

- responses sent to the analysis center at the University of Georgia;

- the major public opinion poll by Louis Harris and Company; and

--your innovative efforts to use the data already compiled for addressing priority conservation needs within individual states.

Public participation will continue to be a way of life in the Soil Conservation Service; in RCA, and in all SCS programs. It is a way of life--now and in the future--in local, state, and national government.

President Carter has asked all federal agencies to improve their decisionmaking for significant program actions. Secretary Bergland has issued Secretary's Memorandum 1955 calling for greater involvement of the public in our significant decisions. It applies mainly to national programs. We are not going to put any big demands on local or state SCS people to help meet these initiatives. But you should know about them.

They are designed to give the public an opportunity it has not had before to influence major public policies and actions--before they are set in concrete.

The agriculture department must vigorously carry out the letter and the spirit of President Carter's mandate. All the public participation in the world is meaningless if the government is not responsive. We at USDA intend to listen to what people tell us and respond appropriately.

Let me close with two comments.

One, several of you heard me say at your state conservationists' meeting in Florida last month that we share a strong commitment to the conservation and management of all natural resources. Such a commitment is essential to our survival as a nation. We need fish and wildlife preservation and soil and water conservation; wilderness areas and commercial forests; wild rivers and harnessed rivers. I believe strongly that the future of an America worth living in depends on a proper balance among all resource values.

With every position I have held, my own definition of what conservation entails has broadened. So has the definition of conservation since your agency began in 1935--or in 1933 if you count the Soil Erosion Service. Your mission will be still broader in the future through open, broad and meaningful public participation.

Your mission must include the full use of the biological, social, and physical sciences to help bring about a harmony between mankind and nature that keeps all resources at a high level of productivity. And your mission will include two-way communication with the public about the problems and possible solutions.

The importance of the role of the American public in guiding Soil Conservation Service decisions cannot be overemphasized. You are being called upon to make decisions that affect people, that affect the biological systems which they care about, and on which they and you depend.

The population of the United States has increased by 100 million people in the past 50 years, and may increase by 150 million in the next half-century. Americans will expect a continuing supply of tangible and intangible products from our nation's land, water, and related resources. They also will demand a cleaner, healthier, and more attractive environment.

They believe that the expertise and funds--their tax dollars--are available to achieve their aims of producing and protecting. They will expect their leaders--and that means you--to bring results.

For you to accomplish what they want and you want, you will have to react to the needs of much broader segments of the American public than ever before. Some of them do not know the Soil Conservation Service exists. Some of them do not use or trust the media or the leadership through which you are accustomed to communicating.

Thus, you will need an ever broader, ever clearer, ever more
compassionate outreach.

I expressed last month--and I repeat now--that America needs a
scrapping, venturous, hard-driving lead agency to guide the nation into a new
era in natural resource conservation on nonfederal land.

I believe you will be that lead agency.

I pledge my personal effort to help you be that lead agency.

I ask each of you to help the American public guide and support you.

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